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ABSTRACT

In September 1996, the Missouri Commissioner of Education appointed a statewide task force on the Achievement of African-American Students. The findings of the state-level task force, the views of Missouri students, and the experience of successful educators all support the conclusion that the single most important nontangible element required to fuel increases in African-American achievement in school is high expectations for students. The key to identifying the issues and fashioning resolutions is a common and public understanding of data related to student success. Following are 11 concrete recommendations focused on the curriculum of the school, the curriculum of the home, and the curriculum of the community: (1) extend learning for all students who are not on track to be proficient in any subject or grade level; (2) minimize absenteeism and create policies for stability; (3) maintain a stable, competent staff at each attendance center; (4) raise the capacity of the staff to effectively teach diverse learners; (5) recruit, employ, and retain a competent faculty that generally reflects the diversity of the student population; (6) increase African-American participation in Missouri's Parents as Teachers Program; (7) engage African-American parents and community leaders in the life of the school community at all grade levels; (8) guarantee that African-American students are involved in high-quality preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-olds; (9) invite successful role models into the school; (10) establish support systems that include individual mentors for African-American students; and (11) initiate and support programs for children and young adults to enrich nonschool activities. The performance scores of African-American students as a class should not be identifiable when compared with scores of nonAfrican-American students. Missouri still has far to go to reach such parity in performance. Six appendixes contain tables of student performance results. (SLD)

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ED 422 421

Raising the Bar – Closing the Gap

Recommendations for Improving the Academic Achievement of African-American Students in Missouri

Published by the Missouri Department
of Elementary and Secondary Education
Robert E. Bartman, Commissioner of Education
December 1997

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Individual success, as well as the collective well-being of our nation and state during the next decade and beyond, hinges on our intellectual competency. The prosperity of our future depends on what *all* citizens know and are able to do.

It is no longer acceptable to educate a portion of our citizens to high levels, while leaving large groups undereducated — a circumstance which, most assuredly, will leave them unemployable and segregated from any hope of prosperity. Indeed, such an outcome would leave us as a nation divided: those with hope and the hopeless; those who "have" and those who "have not" — and who have no way to get.

Notwithstanding the fact that many individual African-American students far exceed national standards, as a group they score below non-African-American students on virtually all standardized tests. Gains have been made in closing this gap, but there remains a significant and unacceptable difference. The focus of the future must be not only to raise the academic bar, but also to close the gap between those who currently do well in Missouri's public schools and those who do not.

The accompanying charts (see pages 9-14) provide recent statistics about the academic performance of Missouri's African-American students, as compared with other groups. These data all confirm that their performance continues to lag significantly behind that of their non-African-American counterparts. Academic performance data from the following sources are provided in the appendices:

"Missouri's African-American students have made gains in closing the achievement gap, but there remains a significant and unacceptable difference."

- 1997 Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) Math Scores
- 1996 and 1997 ACT Scores for Missouri (separate reports for students who take the ACT "core courses" and those who do not)
- 1996 and 1997 SAT Scores for Missouri
- 1996 and 1997 Scores from the Missouri Mastery and Achievement Tests (MMAT)
- 1996 Missouri Math Scores, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

Although tests themselves are only a snapshot of what students actually know and are able to do, the composite picture represented by these data should be a clarion call to all of our citizens to mobilize our energies toward closing this unacceptable gap. Leaders in the African-American community and African-American parents should indeed be angry about low achievement scores, because those scores represent a tragic underdevelopment of valuable human resources.

State-level Task Force Established

In September 1996, Missouri Commissioner of Education Robert E. Bartman appointed a statewide Task Force on the Achievement of African-American Students. The 25-member panel included local school officials and teachers, parents, business people and community leaders. The group met several times with Commissioner Bartman, staff of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and outside consultants to review current achievement data and to discuss possible ways of improving African-American students' academic performance. The recommendations included in this report are based on the work and the input of the task force.

"Convincing our children that 'achievement matters' is Task #1 for the new Campaign for African-American Achievement."

— Hugh B. Price
President, Urban League

At the suggestion of the task force, Dr. Bartman held three special meetings with African-American students to gather information and opinions that would buttress the panel's research. The informal "focus groups" with students were held during November and December of 1996 in Jefferson City, Kansas City and St. Louis.

The Key: High Expectations for All Students

The findings of the state-level task force, the views of Missouri students, and the experience of successful educators all support the inevitable conclusion that the single most important nontangible element required to fuel increases in African-American achievement in school is **high expectations for all students.**

We must expect all of our children to do well, regardless of the color of their skin or the income level of their parents or guardians. Indeed, we will get what we expect. Children, parents, teachers and communities have an almost eerie capacity to understand what is expected of them and to perform up to that expectation.

There are clearly powerful influences inside and outside of the school which affect a child's success. Those influences provide children and youth with a varied "curriculum." There is a "curriculum of the school" which must be rich, academically strong, and buttressed by strong teaching and high expectations for all students. There is a "curriculum of the home." Ideally, the home environment reinforces the school's efforts by setting high expectations and providing activites which contribute to children's intellectual development and emotional well-being. In some cases, though, the curriculum of the home is unplanned, unhealthy or even contradictory to the formal school curriculum. Finally, there is a "curriculum of the community" and of the popular culture outside the school and home. These outside forces can have a significant and negative influence on a child's academic success.

For all to have success in school, all must harness the power of these influences and direct them to raising the performance level of all students and closing the gap between those who currently achieve well and those who do not.

The key to identifying the issues and fashioning resolutions is a common and public understanding of data related to student success. Communities must demand that performance data be specifically reported ("disaggregated") in terms of gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity and not just according to school- or district-wide averages. The information is public, and the public must know if appropriate action is to be taken. It is much too easy to bury serious problems in the numbers — and to create an illusion of success by relying on average achievement data.

Following are 11 concrete recommendations focused on the curriculum of the school, the curriculum of the home and the curriculum of the community.

The Curriculum of the School

1. Extend learning for all students who are not on track to be proficient in any subject or grade level.

Some children require more time to learn. The school should be organized so that children who need additional help receive it either before school, after school, on Saturday or during the summer.

No child should move to the next learning level unless he or she has the knowledge and skills for that grade level. In-grade retention should not be the preferred method for reteaching and remediation. In fact, research suggests that retention for a whole grade permanently puts students in the position of attempting to go up the down escalator and increases the likelihood that they will ultimately drop out of school.

2. Minimize absenteeism and create policies for stability.

Students and the school curriculum should start on the first day of school. Unfortunately, schools with high proportions of African-American students also have high absenteeism, particularly during the first weeks of school. This sometimes encourages a delay in the district beginning the year of regular instruction. Communities, parents and schools must emphasize the importance of regular attendance, not just at the beginning of the school year, but throughout the entire school year.

Typically, districts with high proportions of African-American students also have high intradistrict mobility. District attendance policies should be modified or adopted to encourage students to remain at the attendance centers where they begin the school year. Moving from school to school during the school year is disruptive to the child, results in lost instructional time and impedes student growth and development.

3. Maintain a stable, competent staff at each attendance center.

Stability in staffing is very important to creating an educational community with common goals and a common understanding of student performance. The turnover of competent staff impedes school success and is disruptive to student learning. School districts should examine their recruitment, hiring, promotion and transfer policies to make sure they do not, directly or indirectly, adversely affect the availability of competent staff in any school.

"It is much too easy to bury serious problems in the numbers – and to create an illusion of success by relying on average achievement data."

4. Raise the capacity of the staff to effectively teach diverse learners.

Professional development for teachers and administrators should be in place which is driven by the need to improve student academic success. Such professional development should include, but not be limited to raising expectations; using student-performance data to evaluate and refine teaching methods; and understanding and teaching to diverse learning styles of students.

5. Recruit, employ and retain a competent faculty which generally reflects the diversity of the student population.

It is critically important to have competent African-American teachers and leaders as part of a school district's faculty. School districts needing to expand the diversity of the teaching force must adopt policies which encourage African-American students to consider teaching as a career choice. Future teacher associations at the high school level should be encouraged and expanded. Scholarships should be expanded to encourage prospective African-American teachers to pursue higher education. Colleges of education must be more aggressive in recruiting top-quality potential teachers from high schools and community colleges.

The Curriculum of the Home

6. Increase African-American participation in the Parents as Teachers program.

Research data clearly show support that children whose families participate in Missouri's Parents as Teachers program are more successful in school than those who do not, when all other variables are held constant. African-American families are underrepresented in this important springboard to success. The fact that African-American families are disproportionately represented among the poor creates an even more complex challenge for improving overall performance, since both groups traditionally under-perform their non-poor, non-African-American counterparts. Therefore, schools and communities should take aggressive measures to raise the participation of African-American families in the Parents as Teachers program.

7. Engage African-American parents and community leaders in the life of the school community at all grade levels.

Parents should be invited to participate as volunteers in the school, as well as on advisory councils working at the school and district levels. PTAs and other school-related organizations should recruit African-American adults to participate and serve in leadership roles. Teachers and school officials should take whatever steps are needed to establish effective two-way communications with parents or guardians. Regular communication enables school personnel to make sure that parents understand the school's expectations, keep families informed of their children's progress, and offer suggestions and guidance on how parents can help their children outside of school.

The Curriculum of the Community

8. Guarantee that African-American students are involved in high-quality preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Brain research confirms that the development of a child's intellectual capacity grows at an accelerated rate from birth to age 3. This essential development continues to increase at a less accelerated rate until age 10. Because, according to the research, all children are born with twice as many brain cells as they ultimately need, no child's position on a "bell-shaped curve" is permanently fixed at the time of birth. All have the innate capacity to learn well. In fact, the child's experiences at a very early age create the template for further learning and success.

As much as half of our children's learning capacity is currently developed prior to the time when they enter school. Economically advantaged families typically provide preschool programs for their 3- and 4-year-olds. This advantage must be provided to all students in groups who typically under-perform their peers. Preschool programs for African-American students should be rich in language development so that children will enter kindergarten equipped with well-developed language skills — the basic tools for further learning.

"Economically advantaged families typically provide preschool programs for their 3- and 4-year-olds. This advantage must be provided to all students who typically under-perform."

9. Invite successful role models into the school.

Successful African-American adults should be invited into the school on a regular basis to visit with classes and individual students about their jobs, careers and professions. Too many times, athletes and entertainers appear to overshadow other adults as successful role models. It is critically important that African-American students see many examples of successful African-American adults as they are forming their aspirations and opinions about possible careers or employment opportunities.

By singularly idolizing and emulating athletes and entertainers, African-American students are perpetuating a myth which promises to keep them enslaved in poverty. The unsung African-American heroes who labor in jobs, professions, public service and in their families must become the realistic models of success and personal fulfillment which can only result from studying and commitment to learning. The foundation of success for African-American students is not built "above the rim."

10. Establish support systems which include individual mentors for African-American students.

Older students, teachers, clergy, retired citizens and other adults can serve as mentors. Children and young people who are having academic difficulty can feel a sense of isolation and failure. Even worse, students may be inclined to band together and form emotionally, behaviorally and academically destructive groups. Mentors and positive role models can help.

11. Initiate and support programs for children and young adults to enrich non-school activities.

Since we know that a student's non-school activities can play a major role in his or her success in school, each community must evaluate the availability of non-school activities and initiate youth-oriented services such as church-affiliated programs, athletic clubs, girls' and boys' clubs, and Scouts. These kinds of programs give children and young people excellent opportunities for personal growth and development. Such programs also can strengthen and enrich the fabric of family and community life.

"We must raise the level of learning for all of our children, in every Missouri community."

A Call to Action

A society unwilling to commit substantial energy and resources to its own perpetuation through the education and training of all of its children is destined to disappear. Our own self-interest should make it obvious that we must raise the level of learning for *all* of our children, in every Missouri community.

The performance scores of African-American students as a class should not be identifiable when compared with scores of non-African-American students. In other words, our goal must be to reach the point where there is no real difference among the achievement scores of different groups. We have far to go to reach such parity in performance.

Raising the academic achievement level for all students and at the same time eliminating the achievement gap for those groups who have traditionally under-performed in our schools must become the societal imperative. ■

Missouri Assessment Program — 1997 Statewide Math Results

RACE/ETHNIC GROUPS							
GRADE 4	**Number of Students**	**Advanced**	**Proficient**	**Nearing Proficiency**	**Progressing**	**Step 1**	**National Percentile**
Indian/Alaskan	187	3%	18%	44%	28%	7%	51.6
Asian	302	21%	25%	34%	16%	4%	67.6
Pacific Islander	62	10%	32%	32%	21%	5%	61.5
African-American	7,803	2%	9%	30%	46%	14%	29.3
Hispanic	565	4%	15%	37%	35%	9%	39.0
White	31,943	11%	30%	38%	19%	2%	62.3
Other	465	7%	28%	37%	24%	4%	56.9
GRADE 8							
Indian/Alaskan	345	0%	5%	19%	37%	38%	41.9
Asian	333	3%	20%	28%	33%	17%	70.6
Pacific Islander	85	0%	15%	20%	42%	22%	58.3
African-American	5,633	0%	1%	8%	29%	61%	27.5
Hispanic	606	0%	8%	18%	33%	41%	41.1
White	29,835	2%	14%	30%	34%	19%	63.6
Other	947	1%	8%	24%	39%	28%	51.0
GRADE 10							
Indian/Alaskan	276	0%	3%	16%	36%	45%	53.7
Asian	315	3%	17%	25%	27%	27%	74.1
Pacific Islander	126	0%	15%	17%	31%	37%	60.3
African-American	3,371	0%	1%	7%	20%	72%	34.4
Hispanic	441	0%	5%	17%	36%	42%	56.9
White	24,625	1%	12%	25%	33%	29%	69.2
Other	795	1%	7%	20%	33%	39%	58.9

APPENDIX B

1996 & 1997 Missouri ACT Scores ("Core or More") by Race/Ethnic Group

CORE* OR MORE										
	English		Math		Reading		Science Reasoning		Composite	
	1996	1997	1996	1997	1996	1997	1996	1997	1996	1997
African-American	18.4	**18.2**	18.2	**18.4**	19.1	**18.7**	18.7	**18.8**	18.7	**18.7**
Caucasian	22.8	**22.8**	22.1	**22.6**	23.7	**23.6**	23.0	**23.0**	23.0	**23.2**
Asian/Pacific	22.5	**22.6**	24.1	**24.5**	23.1	**23.1**	23.2	**23.3**	23.4	**23.5**
State	22.5	**22.5**	21.8	**22.3**	23.4	**23.3**	22.7	**22.7**	22.7	**22.8**

** Core is defined by ACT as four or more credits of English, three or more credits of mathematics, three or more credits of social studies, and three or more credits of science.*

APPENDIX C

1996 & 1997 Missouri ACT Scores ("Less than Core") by Race/Ethnic Group

LESS THAN CORE										
	English		Math		Reading		Science Reasoning		Composite	
	1996	1997	1996	1997	1996	1997	1996	1997	1996	1997
African-American	16.1	**15.8**	16.4	**16.3**	17.0	**16.8**	17.2	**17.2**	16.8	**16.7**
Caucasian	19.6	**19.5**	18.8	**19.2**	20.7	**20.6**	20.3	**20.4**	20.0	**20.1**
Asian/Pacific	19.0	**18.8**	21.2	**20.9**	19.2	**19.3**	20.2	**20.1**	20.0	**19.9**
State	19.2	**19.1**	18.6	**18.9**	20.3	**20.2**	20.0	**20.1**	19.7	**19.7**

APPENDIX D

1996 & 1997 Missouri SAT Scores by Race/Ethnic Group

VERBAL MEAN SCORE		
	1996	**1997**
American Indian	550	538
Asian	566	555
African-American	488	476
Mexican-American	571	545
Puerto Rican	554	486
Other Hispanic	593	532
White	582	582
Other	574	596
State Mean Score	**570**	**567**

MATH MEAN SCORE		
	1996	**1997**
American Indian	535	529
Asian	617	609
African-American	467	464
Mexican-American	571	526
Puerto Rican	578	476
Other Hispanic	571	536
White	579	581
Other	576	577
State Mean Score	**569**	**568**

APPENDIX E

1996 & 1997 MMAT Results by Race/Ethnic Group

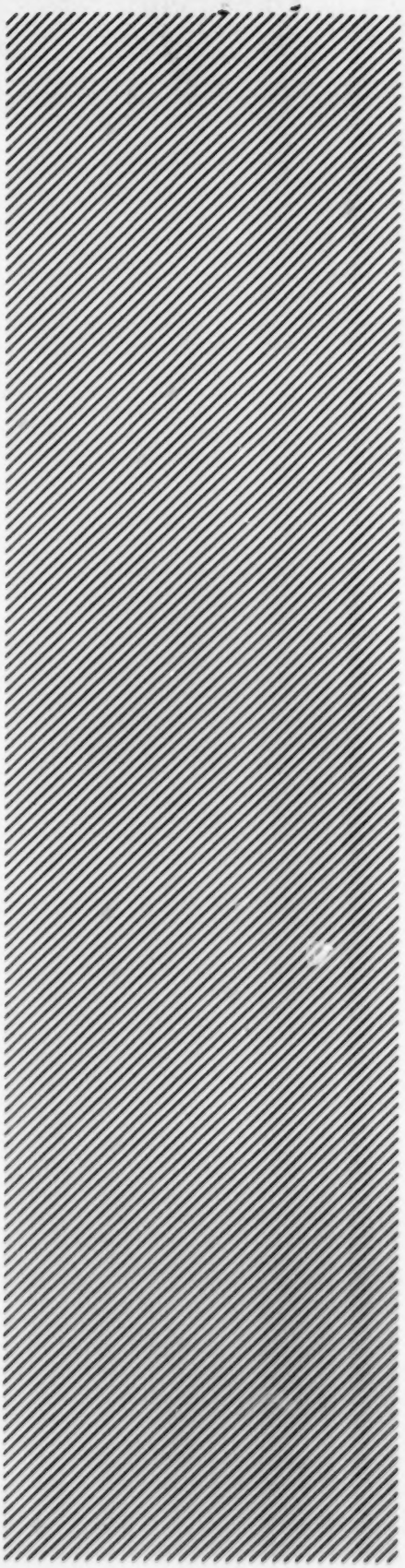
Subject	Race/Ethnic Group	Percent of Students Scoring Above 60 Percentile	Percent of Students Scoring Below 40 Percentile
		1996 1997	1996 1997
Reading	Indian/Alaskan	29.38 / **29.24**	49.68 / **51.43**
	Asian/Pacific	48.92 / **48.83**	30.78 / **32.23**
	Hispanic	31.46 / **29.94**	48.41 / **50.58**
	African-American	16.53 / **16.64**	67.63 / **67.40**
	White	42.49 / **42.37**	37.11 / **37.37**
	Other	33.11 / **34.68**	46.52 / **45.89**
	Race missing	39.20 / **35.72**	40.82 / **44.43**
	TOTAL	40.25 / **40.22**	39.69 / **39.85**
Math	Indian/Alaskan	29.08 / **28.36**	49.80 / **50.00**
	Asian/Pacific	52.63 / **52.98**	28.33 / **28.20**
	Hispanic	30.98 / **30.62**	50.14 / **50.39**
	African-American	13.18 / **14.09**	72.54 / **71.66**
	White	42.29 / **42.33**	37.06 / **37.21**
	Other	32.99 / **32.56**	46.98 / **46.01**
	Race missing	39.80 / **36.85**	40.27 / **43.51**
	TOTAL	40.10 / **40.25**	39.73 / **39.70**
Science	Indian/Alaskan	34.13 / **32.92**	45.20 / **47.91**
	Asian/Pacific	48.81 / **46.71**	31.43 / **33.15**
	Hispanic	32.62 / **31.40**	48.45 / **49.88**
	African-American	15.28 / **15.58**	70.29 / **70.04**
	White	42.63 / **42.32**	36.99 / **37.19**
	Other	34.74 / **35.74**	46.94 / **43.56**
	Race missing	37.50 / **36.71**	41.96 / **43.83**
	TOTAL	40.19 / **40.17**	39.88 / **39.80**
Social Studies	Indian/Alaskan	31.75 / **31.25**	46.90 / **48.27**
	Asian/Pacific	48.39 / **47.76**	30.97 / **31.99**
	Hispanic	31.83 / **30.65**	48.34 / **49.60**
	African-American	14.49 / **14.07**	70.09 / **70.71**
	White	42.74 / **42.47**	36.86 / **37.05**
	Other	33.91 / **34.96**	46.30 / **45.01**
	Race missing	38.60 / **37.17**	41.47 / **43.08**
	TOTAL	40.28 / **40.21**	39.71 / **39.69**

This analysis excludes, from both years, those school districts which had limited or no participation in 1997.

1996 Missouri Math Results
National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)
(State by State)

RACE/ETHNIC GROUPS						
GRADE 4	**Percent of Students**	**Average Scale Score**	**Percent Advanced**	**Percent Proficient**	**Percent Basic**	**Percent Below Basic**
White	76%	230	1%	23%	50%	26%
African-American	15%	201	0%	2%	29%	69%
Hispanic	6%	214	1%	9%	40%	50%
GRADE 8						
White	82%	278	3%	22%	45%	30%
African-American	12%	243	0%	4%	22%	75%
Hispanic	3%	259	1%	9%	37%	52%

Figures may not equal 100% because of rounding.



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